

172-108 Economic development opportunity

Could Washington be 'Great'?

Development leaders to make pitch in state initiative

By Sheri Mohler
The JOURNAL

Approximately 30 people gathered on Monday afternoon at cafe dodici to hear Anita Walker, director of Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, explain what Washington can do to become a "Great Place"—officially, that is.

"Great Places" is a statewide initiative to partner local people from different Iowa communities with state governmental agency representatives to promote and enhance what is "good, authentic, and unique" in each place.

Washington Economic Development Group president Steve Olson volunteered to take the first step. He said he would send a "letter of invitation" to the Great Places Citizen Advisory Board by July 1, on behalf of WEDG. The letter need not indicate what the city hopes to accomplish through the "Great Places" program, only that it wishes to participate.

All places extending an invitation will be assigned a team of "coaches" to work with citizens to develop an

offer to the Great Places Citizens Advisory Board, which must be submitted by the end of September. The coaches are mostly from state agencies, with some from federal agencies and rural development programs.

Local "offers" to the board should include ideas on how to use state and local funding to develop community improvement plans that could range from establishing new trailheads to increasing a city's retail sales.

Program "coaches" will visit each participating place at least once during the summer and will communicate with the citizens via e-mail and phone to create a goal with clear, measurable results—such as a plan to increase the number of businesses in that place—that can reasonably be achieved over the next year.

Proposals must be submitted by the end of September in order for a place to be considered by the board. The offer can come in any form,

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Anita Walker (standing) talks with roughly 30 people at cafe dodici, Monday afternoon, about the state's new "Great Places" initiative. Three "Great Places" will be chosen to develop a pilot

program that will couple state and local money to make community improvements.

Journal photo by Josh O'Leary

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from a video to an invitation for a visit by the members of the board. Walker encouraged "bold, innovative, and creative" offers.

Three "places"—Walker emphasized that the term "community" should not be used because it is too limiting—will be selected by the Great Places Citizen Advisory Board for a pilot program. The board, consisting of Iowa business people, members of city governmental agencies, a University of Iowa student, and an employee of a community college, will make their

selections by the end of the year.

The Advisory Board, appointed by Governor Tom Vilsak, has established seven "dimensions" of a Great Place — a unique sense of place, engaging experiences, a rich social fabric, a vital economy, a pleasing environment, a strong foundation, and a creative culture.

Walker stressed the importance of broad community support for the project and said that places with diverse populations are preferred.

In order to be chosen for the pilot program, Walker said the three places will have broad community support, be willing to make a strong

local investment, and be focused on achieving quick, measurable results.

The places selected for the pilot program will work with a "custom team" to strike an agreement with the board by Jan. 1, 2006. The agreement will include state resources, but there is an expectation that the place will make a strong investment of local money.

All interested people are invited to attend the first town meeting next Wednesday, June 29, at 9 a.m., at cafe dodici, to discuss what direction Washington will take toward being chosen for the pilot program.

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